

A map of England and Wales is shown, divided into various colored regions. Overlaid on the map is a target graphic consisting of several concentric circles, with the center of the target positioned over the South West region of England. The title text is positioned to the right of the map.

Developing partnerships, enhancing services

Citizens Advice in the South West

Introduction

The Citizens Advice service is one of the best known organisations in England and Wales. We score highly on trust and recognition in public polls, with 95 per cent of the population having heard of us.

We provide free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity and challenge discrimination. Our aims are two-fold; to provide the advice people need for the problems they face, and to improve the policies and practices that affect their lives.

Partnership

The Citizens Advice service works in partnership with agencies from all sectors, at local, regional and national level. We are always striving to achieve more and recognise this is often best done by partnering with others. This briefing sets out the benefits of working with the Citizens Advice service for regional agencies and the local communities they support.



Comprehensive coverage in the South West

In the South West region the Citizens Advice service is one of the largest third sector providers of advice, operating from over 50 high street premises in the region and providing outreach services from 330 outlets.

During 2007/08 514,682 people in the South West region were able to turn to Citizens Advice for help to resolve their money, legal, employment or other problems.

High quality advice

Every Citizens Advice Bureau is an independent charity and a member of Citizens Advice, the national body that:

- provides bureaux with training and specialist support
- audits the operational efficiency of bureaux and the quality of their advice
- coordinates national policy and campaigning work.

Together we are the Citizens Advice service, combining the resource and experience of a national organisation with the intimate local knowledge of frontline agencies.

All issues, all people

In 2007/08 the bureaux in the South West region advised on 728,302 issues. Many clients are advised on multiple issues as their problems are dealt with holistically.

The most common issues in the South West region are:

- debt 32%
- benefits and tax credits 27%
- employment 9%
- housing 7%
- consumer and utilities 7%
- family and relationships 6%.

Twenty six bureaux in the South West region are able to provide civil legal advice through contracts with the Legal Services Commission.

The Citizens Advice service is also a leader in equality and diversity best practice. We aim to develop and deliver discrimination advice, from first point of contact to resolution, in partnership with others.

Nine and-a-half per cent of clients using the service in the region are from black or minority ethnic communities; 19 per cent are disabled; 12 per cent are below the age of 25 and 13 per cent are over 65 years.

Informing policy

Bureaux record all enquiries in a central database, providing a unique picture of the problems faced by residents in the region. This service data can be analysed at national or local level, and allows for tracking trends year on year.

This intelligence informs the development of local services as well as the setting of policy objectives for the South West.

In addition to statistical data on enquiries, bureaux record detailed, anonymous descriptions of cases. These provide rich, qualitative information which demonstrates unquestionably to policy makers and service providers, the impact of their decisions on individuals' lives.

Partnership working for client-centred services

Bureaux belong to networks of statutory and third sector community agencies. They frequently identify common goals and separate strengths, leading to partnership work that delivers more joined up, client-centred services for people throughout the South West region.

As a service, we recognise that it is only by working with a range of partners that we can improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable groups in society.

We currently work with partners from the public, private and third sectors to ensure our experience, and that of our clients, is used proactively to inform policy and practice for the better. Our existing partnerships include the sharing of statistical information to facilitate advice needs assessment, as well as the development of new and existing services.

Some bureaux, such as Mid Somerset, have secured partnership funding from the health service to provide outreach services in GP surgeries and health settings.

The service also runs the Devon Welfare Rights Unit, funded by Devon County Council, to provide consultancy, training and case work at a specialist level across the county.

Plymouth, Bristol and Torbay bureaux participate in and lead networks of advice agencies. Other counties have formed consortia. In Cornwall bureaux are working to provide a single advice service and a networked telephone service.

Case study

Torbay Citizens Advice bureau is working in partnership with Sure Start, a local housing trust and the Primary Care Trust, to provide a community outreach worker in a local surgery for three days a week. In 2006/07 the service dealt with 1,469 new enquiries for 846 clients bringing in a total of £130,696 in income for the clients. The project has been so successful that it has been awarded Big Lottery funding to extend the service to other health centres.

Developing the regional and local economy in the South West

- Citizens Advice bureaux in the South West are both small businesses and training agencies, employing and training 550 local staff. In addition we train and rely on over 1,880 volunteers each year.
- Based on current rates of pay for employed staff, the value of the contribution made by volunteers in the South West region is estimated at £11 million.
- Almost a third of volunteers go into paid employment following training and support in bureaux.
- Across the South West region the Citizens Advice service brings money into the pockets of families and individuals through benefit take up, management of debt, and advice on employment and housing. This extra wealth often stays in the community, boosting the local economy.
- In the course of delivering projects to improve financial inclusion, 19 new financial inclusion advisers have been brought into the region through our successful national programme – funded by the Department of Business, Employment and Regulatory Reform. This work is being developed with local partners – Single Parent Action Network, Bristol Debt Advice Centre and Plymouth Money Advice.
- The Citizens Advice service hosts two financial capability forums across the South West and is expanding its work in money advice.

Our strategic priorities

Across the South West bureaux are making an important contribution to regional priorities and the service is actively seeking to develop partnerships to deliver on our ambitious 2008-11 strategy, of which the key priorities are:

- Easier and faster access to advice and information for more people.
- To strengthen our voice in social policy.
- To develop the Citizens Advice Bureaux network.
- To develop new initiatives in advice.
- A commitment to equality.

We recognise that it is only by working in partnership that we can achieve more and we welcome contact from other agencies and stakeholders as to how we can work with them on these shared agendas.

If you want to talk about working with Citizens Advice in the South West, please contact:

Helen Scadding
Partnership Development Manager
Citizens Advice South Area
Quintana Gate
Ground Floor
Bartholomew Street East
Exeter
EX4 3BH
01392 455611
helen.scadding@citizensadvice.org.uk